



# Paradise Unified School District: *Building School Mental Health Systems to Support Healing and Recovery Through Project Cal-Well*

**Project Cal-Well** is a program that aims to expand mental health services in schools and communities. The California Department of Education initiated the program in 2014 and has led its implementation ever since. The program was funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) through their "Now Is The Time" - Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education (NITT-AWARE) grant program. In Cohort 2 (2019–24), the California Department of Education partnered with districts across five Northern California counties, including **Paradise Unified School District** (PUSD).

## PUSD Overview

PUSD serves the rural foothill communities of Paradise, Magalia, and Stirling City, which have faced unparalleled challenges following the devastating 2018 Camp Fire. PUSD serves approximately 1,600 students across the following schools:

**Cedarwood Elementary School**  
**Pine Ridge Elementary School**  
**Paradise Ridge Elementary School**  
**Paradise Jr. High School**  
**Paradise High School**  
**Paradise E-Learning Academy**  
**Ridgeview High School (continuation)**

Most (75%) of the students are White, while

15 percent are Hispanic or Latine, and 7 percent are two or more races. The majority of students (64%) are socioeconomically disadvantaged, 1 percent are English Learners, and 4 percent are experiencing homelessness.<sup>1</sup>

## Project Cal-Well Areas of Focus

Implementing Project Cal-Well has facilitated a multifaceted approach to healing and recovery in PUSD. Through Project Cal-Well, PUSD established the Administrator on Special Assignment position, which has provided critical district leadership for a comprehensive approach to school mental health. Project Cal-Well provided PUSD with a foundation critical to acquiring subsequent grants to sustain and continue building capacity to meet

<sup>1</sup> California School Dashboard. (n.d.). *District performance overview: Northern Humboldt Union High*. California Department of Education. Retrieved April 5, 2024, from <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/04615310000000/2023>

the community's mental health needs. PUSD has focused on the following activities across the three main components of the Project Cal-Well model.

### **Component 1: Provide Universal Support to Create Positive School Climates That Help Students Develop Social–Emotional Skills, Promote Resilience, and Increase School Safety (Tier 1)**

**Mental Health Services Awareness.** Various mental health awareness campaigns have focused on increasing the awareness of students, educators, and the PUSD community about accessing mental health support and services and increasing knowledge. For example, the district created flyers to share information about [practical coping strategies](#) and [how friendships support mental health](#). Through Project Cal-Well, PUSD trained individuals in the mental health workforce along with those not in the mental health workforce in strategies to improve the prevention of mental health problems and promote mental health awareness, such as how to recognize and respond to signs of a mental health challenge.

**Social–Emotional Learning.** One of the primary objectives set by PUSD to enhance student achievement has been to prioritize social–emotional learning (SEL). The district has implemented an SEL approach known as [RULER](#) to achieve this goal. RULER, an acronym for Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating, focuses on developing these five key social–emotional intelligence skills. This initiative aims to establish a shared social–emotional vocabulary throughout all grades and schools within the district.

**Screening and Data Use.** The district also prioritized mental health by implementing universal screeners starting in 2019/20, including the Social, Academic, & Emotional Behavior Risk Screener<sup>2</sup> (SAEBRS), the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ),<sup>3</sup> and the Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL)<sup>4</sup> measure. In 2023/24, PUSD advanced this approach by integrating data from monthly Kelvin real-time pulses, allowing site administrators to customize monthly questions based on their specific goals. Learn more about Paradise's screening efforts in this [Project Cal-Well brief](#).

**Suicide Prevention.** As part of their suicide prevention efforts, PUSD created a video and education series titled "[Talk to Me, I'll Listen](#)." Tailored for grades 9–12 students and parents, these videos encouraged open conversations and the building of support networks to address suicidal ideation among students. Staff in grades 7–12 wore matching shirts to signify that they were safe adults to talk to, and staff in grades 7–8 created their own suicide prevention program to ensure continuity with the initiative once the students entered high school.

### **Component 2: Increase Availability of and Access to School-Based Mental Health Services (Tier 2)**

**Dedicated Mental Health Clinicians.** Before 2018, the district lacked dedicated Mental Health Clinicians, relying instead on contracted services only for students receiving Medi-Cal. However, the Butte County Office of Education (BCOE), recognizing the critical need for additional support, generously provided PUSD with five Mental Health Clinicians through grant funds provided by the North

<sup>2</sup> Kilgus, S. P., Chafouleas, S. M., & Riley-Tillman, T. C. (2013). Development and initial validation of the social and academic behavior risk screener for elementary grades. *School Psychology Quarterly, 28*(3), 210.

von der Embse, N. P., Iaccarino, S., Mankin, A., Kilgus, S. P., & Magen, E. (2017). Development and validation of the social, academic, and emotional behavior risk screener–student rating scale. *Assessment for Effective Intervention, 42*(3), pp. 186–192.

<sup>3</sup> Goodman, R. (1997). The strengths and difficulties questionnaire: A research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 38*, 581–586.

<sup>4</sup> Stamm, B. H. (2010). *The concise ProQOL manual*. ProQOL.org.

Valley Community Foundation following the 2018 fire. In the 2022/23 school year, PUSD reached an agreement to transition the current BCOE counselors into PUSD employees. PUSD received a 5-year grant in 2021 and strategically allocated funds to sustain these counselors' employment through 2026, demonstrating the district's commitment to long-term mental health initiatives. Through Project Cal-Well, from fall 2020 through December 2023, 78 percent of the 969 students referred to mental health services from PUSD schools received services from either school-based or community-based providers.

**Wellness Centers.** With support from Project Cal-Well, PUSD achieved a major milestone by establishing grant-funded Wellness Centers in partnership with Butte County Behavioral Health. Launched first at Paradise High School in 2021/22 and Ridgeview High School in 2022/23 and then followed by Paradise Junior High School in 2024/25, they serve as accessible hubs for essential services, including mental health supports and access to community aid (e.g., food, housing support). Plans to create additional sites in 2024/25 showcase a widespread commitment to promoting wellness districtwide.

### Component 3: Build Partnerships and Cross-System Collaborations to Promote Youth Well-Being and Improve Access to Mental Health Services

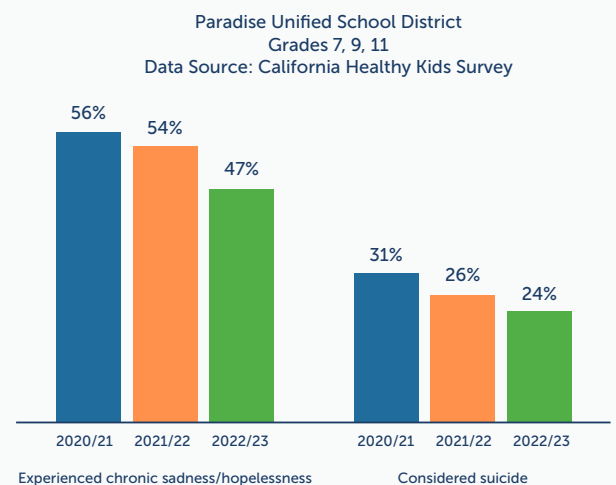
**Cross-Agency Collaboration.** PUSD created or renewed many community partnerships to improve the delivery of school-based mental health services and programs. The Administrator on Special Assignment position has been instrumental in fostering collaboration among various entities, including state and county agencies such as Butte County Behavioral Health; the BCOE; Youth for Change (Y4C); Physicians Committed; the Butte County Community Assessment, Response, and

Education (CARE) Team; the Boys and Girls Club; Strengthening Families; and Project Cal-Well Partners. Ongoing monthly collaboration meetings have served as a platform for open dialogue, strategic planning, and implementation among these educational partners. These collaborative meetings have resulted in student referrals to resources that can support their health and well-being and access a web of community supports.

### Student Perspectives: Impact

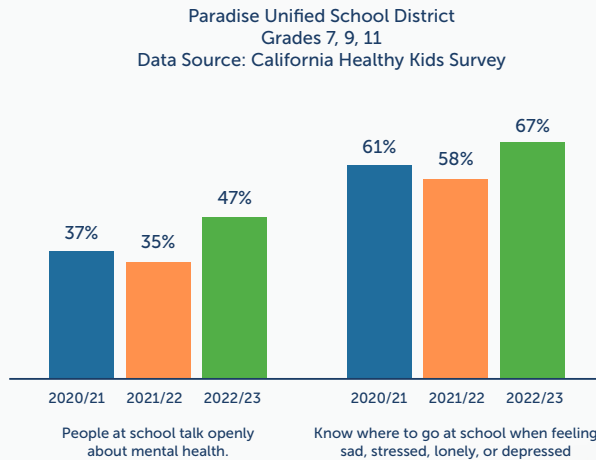
To understand the impact of recent work to improve the system of supports for students, PUSD looks to survey findings to gauge changes in student wellness. For example, California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) student data demonstrate a reduction in the percentage of secondary students reporting that they experienced chronic sadness/hopelessness and that they had seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year. Table 1 shows a declining rate in the percentage of students who experienced chronic sadness and who considered suicide from 2020 to 2023.

Table 1. Percent of Students in PUSD Who Experienced Chronic Sadness and Considered Suicide, 2020–2023



The CHKS data in Table 2 also demonstrate that an increased percentage of secondary students report that people talk openly about mental health in their schools and that they know where to go at school when feeling sad, stressed, lonely, or depressed.

Table 2. Percent of Students in PUSD Who Feel People Talk Openly About Mental Health and Who Know Where to Go at School When Feeling Sad, Stressed, Lonely, or Depressed, 2020–2023



## Sustaining the Work

In 2022, PUSD received a Mental Health Student Services grant to sustain the Administrator on Special Assignment position after Project Cal-Well funds expire. PUSD has plans to apply for additional grants to continue and enhance the work facilitated by Project Cal-Well. Moreover, the district plans to establish a centralized PUSD Resource Center, a one-stop hub for accessing services and promoting greater cross-sector collaboration. PUSD is also committed to developing Wellness Centers on every school campus, providing more opportunities for students to access services. Finally, PUSD plans to continue administering the Behavioral Health Modules of the [CHKS](#) to monitor trends in student mental health.

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